

Teensafe spy app forces parents to choose between trust and online safety

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The internet can be a dangerous place for kids but respect and trust are vital to healthy family relationships.

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Dr Joe Tucci believes there are inherent problems with spy apps.

To spy or not to spy on our children, that is the question posed by new monitoring app Teensafe.

The \$14.95 a month snoop service, which lets a parent monitor their children's online activity, was developed in 2011 by a group of Californian parents who were concerned that the number of children using smartphones in the US had grown from 10 to 80 per cent in just five years.

"Devices are becoming more prevalent in kids' lives – often they're with them the whole time," says Teensafe chief executive Rawdon Messenger. "A 10-year-old with a phone, in some ways they're not ready for it."

With more than a million sign-ups in three years, Teensafe has doubled its number of subscribers in the past six months. "The growth is coming from parents who are saying, 'I really need to check out what's going on'," says Messenger, who has a seven-year-old daughter.

"Privacy and respecting boundaries is very important," he says, "but in certain cases safety and protection trumps privacy, especially when it comes to sexting, bullying and depression."

Teensafe users can log into an account and see a child's messages, including deleted texts, and view their social media feeds, but the service doesn't allow you to listen to phone conversations.

"We also won't store or download any of the child's images from the device," Messenger says. "That's a feature that could make our service more attractive, but we don't feel that's necessary."

Not everyone agrees with the Teensafe approach. Dr Joe Tucci, head of the Australian Childhood Foundation, believes there are inherent problems with such monitoring apps.

"I think it undermines the trust that parents and kids need to have in order to have a positive relationship," Tucci says. "As kids get older, parents need to be like a lighthouse for their children. When things are going rough, parents are the people you need to be able to go to, and talk to. That trust is critical as a foundation for that open, honest communication. These sorts of apps undermine that. They basically say we can't trust our young people ... we have to intrude into their world."

Primary school teacher Nikki Howard says she would not use Teensafe to see what her 12-year-old daughter Abby was doing on Instagram. She feels their relationship is open enough, and not worth jeopardising with a spy app.

"I can see why people would use it, but it's not for us," Howard says. "You don't want to be too involved in their lives and too controlling. You wonder if people who are doing it let their kids do more because they know exactly where they are. But what would stop a child from leaving their phone

somewhere and nicking off and doing something else?"

In her first year of high school, Abby says she wouldn't be happy for her parents to be able to read all of her text messages and social media posts. "They'd be invading my privacy. I don't go reading mum's messages so why does she have to read mine? I don't think it's necessary because I tell mum everything anyway."

One Melbourne family with a tech-obsessed 11-year-old discovered she had downloaded free messaging app Kik without their permission and was corresponding with a "boy from California".

Her mother worries about perverts and paedophiles using these platforms as stalking grounds. "It would enter my mind to use [Teensafe] but I'd have to really think about it. I do think it's important to tell your child. My daughter is already hiding things from me, and sneaking into her room with the phone. If I want the open conversation, I'm going to play the honesty card first."

The 39-year-old mother of two tween girls admits this is new ground for parents of digital natives and is difficult to negotiate, given the pace of emerging technologies.

"We're new to this. We weren't part of this culture when we were kids. She's connecting with somebody she doesn't know, she's using her own name and her own picture, and these are all the 'no-no's that they've learnt in cyber safety at school but they're not making the connection."

Messenger says Teensafe advises its users to divulge the use of the app, rather than using it covertly, but admits in some cases going behind your child's back may be the only way to get to the truth.

"If you're concerned about your child and you have no other way of finding out what's going on, as a parent it's a no brainer. People have found out their children are dealing drugs, or are truant from school, and if that's going on what's more important to you – growing trust with your child or checking that everything is OK?"

Tucci warns getting access to a child's digital life can open up a Pandora's box of dilemmas. "It can be insidious. It's tempting for parents to use it not only for safety but potentially for other reasons, and inadvertently you get access to information about friends that you shouldn't have. And that's going to be disastrous."

The child psychologist suggests ongoing communication with a child is the best way to navigate the turbulent teenage years. "If you're worried about your child, the best thing you can do is talk to them. But that shouldn't be the only time that you're trying to talk to them. This kind of app gives the impression that you don't need to be there."

Katina Michael, associate professor of the School of Information Systems and Technology at the University of Wollongong, worries that spy apps encourage disengagement. "My fear is that technology becomes a replacement for good parenting or a replacement for a teen thinking freely about what they should or shouldn't do."

She says research suggests this type of surveillance could be dangerous in the wrong hands. "Police have already cautioned against the use of spy apps because they are well aware of how more covert software is being used to track someone's whereabouts. In the most heinous crimes, third parties have gained access to handsets, downloaded spy apps, and then recovered co-ordinates and location information and committed terrible things," she says.

Messenger acknowledges the safety debate is heated, but that all Teensafe does is allow parents to do what they're already doing in a more comprehensive way.

"You can spy on your child's email, have the passwords to their social media, grab their phone and go through it – there are lots of different ways of doing this, we just facilitate it and make it easier to do remotely."

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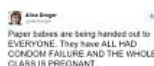
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